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Useful websites :

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www.france3.fr/regions/index.html

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The Celtic Languages in North America: Notes from the Field

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Studying Breton in North America: Challenges and Opportunities¹

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Introduction

Breton is one of the four Celtic languages which still have a significant pool of native speakers, the others being Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic. Of these four, Breton, a Brythonic language closely related to Welsh and Cornish, is generally the least accessible to the potential learner in North America. This is for several readily identifiable reasons. First of all, Breton immigration to North America was never of the same magnitude as immigration from Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Therefore, there are fewer people of Breton ethnic background who might wish to reclaim Breton as a heritage language, and there are fewer native Breton speakers in North America who could serve as potential teachers. Additionally, most materials for studying Breton language and culture are written in French. Few of these works are available in English translation, and even those are almost never found in bookstores and have to be special ordered. As a corollary, the fact that Breton is a minority language not of the British Isles but of France means that Anglophone North Americans are much less likely even to be aware of its existence.

¹ I wish to thank the following people who provided assistance in assembling this information: Lois Kuter, Pawl Birt, Eve Sweetser, Natalie Novik, Gildas Hamel, Lenora Timm, David Darr, and Wayne Harbert.

Nevertheless, its being a member of the Celtic family does stimulate interest in Breton for many people who would probably never discover it otherwise. There are numerous Celtic heritage organizations in North America, and it is not unusual for these groups to represent several or even all six Celtic languages or cultures when hosting musical or other cultural events. As a result, some North Americans of Celtic but not Breton descent come to be interested in Breton as well.

Accurate figures on the number of speakers of Breton today are not available, since France systematically refuses to ask language questions on its census forms. (Brittany has been part of France since 1532). The official French attitude towards its minority languages and cultures is epitomized by the infamous slogan "Il est interdit de cracher par terre et de parler breton" ("It is forbidden to spit on the ground and to speak Breton.")² In its list of the languages of the world ranked according to population, the *Ethnologue* (Grimes 1995) puts Breton at number 407, with 500,000 speakers. Other estimates differ significantly from this figure. The Breton sociolinguist Fañch Broudic gives the more modest figure of 250,000 speakers or 16% of the population of Brittany.³

In addition to the difficulties Bretons face with the French administration, they have for years been embroiled in internal debates over the choice of an orthography. Some of the orthographic difficulties come from dialect differences in Breton, especially those which pit the Gwened dialect (called Vannetais in French) against the other three, the dialects of Kernev, Leon and Tregor, collectively known as KLT. During the twentieth century no fewer than three different orthographic systems were promoted by various groups. Thankfully the debate seems to be subsiding a bit, with the "brezhoneg peurunvan" or "Unified Breton" orthography, also known as zedacheg, being the unofficial winner. In any case, most Breton learning materials accessible to the English speaker use this orthography, although the learner will

² The website <http://www.gwalarn.org/brezhoneg/vezh/kinnig.html> catalogs a number of historical quotes from government officials at various levels about the desirability of making the Breton language disappear.

³ Broudic's website is available at:

(<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/fanch.broudic/pajennou/interdit.html>).

still encounter the other spellings on websites and in some publications. The differences between the three systems are not insurmountably large and affect only a handful of variables, though these are of rather high frequency. (By way of illustration, the word for "rain" is variously spelled *glaw*, *glao*, or *glav*, and the Breton name for Brittany appears as *Breiz* or *Breizh*). The problems posed for learners do not seem much greater than the spelling variations encountered in Modern Welsh, which largely pass today without comment (such as *ysgrifennu*, *sgrifennu* or *sgwennu* "to write," or *dych chi*, 'dych chi, dach chi etc., "you are").

The best way to learn Breton is to enroll in a language course in Brittany, of which there are a wide variety ranging from weekend to week-long to semester-long courses. The difficulty for the Anglophone is that these are taught through the medium of French. Outside of Brittany, one can also study Breton at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth and at Lampeter. In this paper I will discuss resources and opportunities for studying the Breton language, which are available in North America. I will begin in section 2 with for-credit courses offered in the college or university setting. In sections 3 and 4, I will discuss independent study and correspondence courses. Given the very small number of official courses available to the North American learner, most people interested in Breton will end up resorting to independent study. In section 5, I will discuss resources available for these individuals.

College courses for credit

Getting sufficient people together to meet minimum enrollments is a recurring problem with LCTLs (Less Commonly Taught Languages) such as Breton. My efforts to locate places in North America where Breton language courses are currently offered for credit turned up only three possibilities, one in Canada and two in California.

At the University of Ottawa near the Ontario-Quebec border, Professor Pawl Birt (a native speaker of Welsh) has recently developed a course entitled "Introduction à la langue et à la culture bretonnes" (CLT 1530). The course is taught through the medium of French using the book *Ni a gomz brezhoneg* (Kerrain 1997; see description below in section 5). As the course title

suggests, the focus is on both the language and the culture of Brittany, and the syllabus identifies a variety of discussion topics in the areas of Breton literature, music and folklore. Dr. Birt expects to offer the course every other year. It is the only Breton course currently on the books in the University of Ottawa's Celtic Studies Program, but in principle, higher-level courses could be taken by special arrangement.⁴

In the United States, both places where Breton language courses are currently available are in California. Professor Eve Sweetser at the University of California, Berkeley periodically teaches a year-long Breton language course (Celtic Studies 102A-B) through the Celtic Studies Program there. The course has been offered three times during the past decade, and twice it was followed up by a higher-level class focussing on reading contemporary Breton writers and poets. When these courses are being offered it is possible for students to register for them via Extension. Professor Sweetser indicated to me that her prospects for offering Breton courses in the next couple years are not good, since she must teach them as an overload and is currently busy directing the Cognitive Science Program.⁵

Also in California is Gildas Hamel, a native Breton and professor of French at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Professor Hamel has periodically taught Breton to small groups as an independent study course.

Apart from the above opportunities for studying the Breton language for college credit, Breton history, literature or linguistic issues are sometimes dealt with in courses on the Celts in general. For example, the Department of Celtic Studies at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, offers a Celtic Literature course which is "[d]esigned to acquaint students with the wide scope of Celtic Literature which has survived in both manuscript and oral tradition." Selections in English

⁴ The program chair and contact person is Pawl Birt (pwbirt@uottawa.ca) and the program website is available at http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/lang-mod/celtic/sitemap_e.html.

⁵ Professor Sweetser can be contacted at swcetser@cogsci.berkeley.edu. The Celtic Studies Program at Berkeley has a website available at <http://ls.berkeley.edu/dept/celtic/>.

translation are chosen from poetry and prose in Irish, Scottish Gaelic, and Manx, as well as Welsh, Cornish, and Breton.⁶

Informal Study Groups

Due to their informal and highly local nature, it is very difficult to learn whether there are active study groups anywhere in North America that meet to study Breton in the evenings or on weekends. The website

<http://www.geocities.com/torontogaelic/index.htm#Breton> provides information about learning any of the six Celtic languages in the greater Toronto area. The contact person for Breton is Jeff Shaw (46 Redwood Avenue, Toronto Ontario M4L 2S6. Telephone: 416/462 – 8793). The website does not give any further information about what kind of study is available.

There is still a website for the University of Chicago Celtic Society (<http://celtic.uchicago.edu/>), which served as an umbrella organisation for several subgroups, one of which was interested in Breton, but I have learned from a former member that the Breton group is now defunct.

Correspondence courses

For those who do not live near Ottawa, Berkeley or Santa Cruz, and who do not have the luxury of travelling to Brittany to take an on-site course, the next-best thing may be a correspondence course. The organisation Skol Ober, located in Lannion, Brittany, offers correspondence courses, most of which are taught through the medium of French, but two of their courses are available in English. One of these uses the English version of the text *Brezhoneg Buan had Aes* (Delaporte 1991), and the other a CD-ROM or DVD-ROM. (The website does not name the CD-ROM/DVD-ROM, but it is probably one of the two discussed in section 5.1 below). Skol Ober's courses are very reasonably priced; the largest expense is purchasing the books and materials.⁷

⁶ Information can be requested from the Department of Celtic Studies, St. Francis Xavier University, P.O. Box 5000, Antigonish, NS, Canada B2G 2W5. Or visit their website at: <http://www.stfx.ca/academic/celtic-studies/course-description.html>

The Département de Celtique at the Université Rennes 2 – Haute Bretagne has traditionally offered Breton correspondance courses as well. Unfortunately their website appears not to provide current information about correspondance courses (the relevant pages on distance education are all out of date), although it does list a number of Breton courses leading to degrees in Breton that can be taken on campus. General information about the university (including on-site Breton study) is available at <http://www.uhb.fr/>.⁸

Independent study

Since opportunities for studying Breton in a classroom setting are so limited in North America, most people interested in learning the language will end up studying it on their own. In this section I will discuss materials and resources available, which will be of use to such students, focussing primarily on resources for the Anglophone learner, although I will mention a few particular things of interest for Francophones as well.

Books and audio materials

The great majority of materials for learning Breton teach through the medium of French. However, a small number of these have been made available in English. Those familiar with the philosophy and methodology of foreign language teaching in North America will note that the existing materials for learning Breton are very European in their approach; they all seem to predate the days of communicative teaching methodology.

The primary text for learning Breton through the medium of English has been a 256-page translation of the French book *Brezhoneg Buan hag Aes* by Per Denez. (For full bibliographic information for this and all books discussed, see the list of references at the end of this article). The 1991 English version is

⁷ Information can be found at (<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/skol-ober/Ahome.htm>) or by writing to Skol Ober, Gwaremm Leurven, 22310 Plufur Breizh, France.

⁸ Other contact information for Rennes 2: Campus Villejean, 6 avenue Gaston Berger, C.S. 24 307, 35043 Rennes Cedex. Telephone: (33) 02 99 14 10 00, Fax: (33) 02 99 14 10 1.

by Raymond Delaporte. Unfortunately this text is currently out of print, but it has been reprinted at least twice (1980 and 1991) after the initial 1977 English edition, so perhaps it will see one more future edition. The course and accompanying cassette tapes consist of 25 lessons. Each opens with a dialogue, and then presents grammatical explanations and exercises. Each chapter is enlivened by one or more pen and ink drawings with amusing Breton captions. The book concludes with a nine-page glossary. There are two ancillary books, each of these also accompanied by two tapes: an exercise book entitled *Komzit ha skrivit brezhoneg*, and a book of everyday Breton phrases and sentences entitled *Brezhoneg bemdez*.

A new method for learning Breton through the medium of English is to be published by the Welsh Academic Press in 2003 entitled *Breton: The Essential Coursebook* (see the publisher's website at <http://www.ashleydrake.com/Welsh%20Academic%20Press/WAP%20forthcoming.htm>). The author, Julie Brake, is an instructor of Welsh at the University of Lampeter in Wales who has also written several books for learning Welsh. The cost of this 200-page book is listed as £14.95.

A smaller, pocket-sized work which is useful though by no means complete in itself is the 175-page *Breton-English English-Breton Dictionary and Phrasebook* by Joseph Conroy (Hippocrene Books 1997). In addition to the "dictionary" portion, this little volume consists of nearly 100 pages of handy phrases and sample sentences divided into topics such as greetings, the weather, numbers, ordering food and drink, the family, and personal names.

There are (at least) two Breton grammars in English: Press (1986) and Everson (1995). Despite being in English, references to French are not altogether absent from these. For instance, Everson presupposes some knowledge of French pronunciation in his discussion of the Breton sound system.

Delaporte (1995) is a 541-page bilingual English-Breton and Breton-English dictionary containing some 9000 entries in each of its two portions. Thankfully, phonetic transcriptions in IPA (the International Phonetic Alphabet) are included for every entry in the Breton-English half. Although not overtly stated anywhere in the dictionary, the pronunciations appear to be those

of the Leon dialect in that, for instance, intervocalic /z/ is pronounced. Professor Delaporte had been working on a much bigger Breton-English dictionary, of which A-G was published in three installments by Mouladurioù hor Yezh. This dictionary was unfortunately never finished before the author's death.

For the computer-oriented, there are two CD-ROMs for learning Breton through the medium of English. The fairly recent *E brezhoneg pa gari!* ("In Breton whenever you like!") allows the user to select English or French as the medium of instruction. It is available in two CD-ROMs or one DVD-ROM (select one or the other format when purchasing) These make use of a thirty-minute Breton language film. The cost of either version is €73.18. Another CD-ROM, *Apprends-moi le breton!* ("Teach me Breton!"), is available for €28 and allows one to learn through the medium of French, English, German or Spanish (any of these four languages can be selected as the medium of instruction on the same CD-ROM). Either of these multimedia packages can be acquired from the Breton bookstore Ar Bed Keltiek (www.arbedkeltiek.com) which has stores in Quimper and Brest but also does business online.

For French speakers interested in learning Breton, the choice of materials is considerably larger. Probably the best text for learning Breton through the medium of French is *Ni a gomz brezhoneg!* by Mark Kerrain (TES, 1997). This 245-page manual comes with an audio CD and includes an eleven-page Breton-French glossary. Each of the 38 lessons contains one or more dialogues, a vocabulary list, comments on pronunciation and grammar, and exercises. Unfortunately the answers to the exercises are not made available (though see discussion below in section 5.2). The book is enlivened by numerous cartoon-like pen and ink sketches and is laid out in a highly readable format.

First and second year books using the "Oulpan" method (the method is familiar to Welsh learners with the spelling Wlpan) are available from Ar Bed Keltiek. These materials are frequently used in evening courses throughout Brittany. The third year book has just been released and a fourth year text is planned as well.

The ASSIMIL course by Fañch Morvannou (volume 1, 1978; volume 2, 1980) comes with cassettes, but in general it is somewhat less appealing than Delaporte (1991) or Kerrain (1997). First of all, it has the disadvantage of using an orthography other

than the *brezhoneg peurunvan* which is the most commonly used today. Secondly, it presents dialect variants randomly, without any information about where these are used or by how many people. In some cases the reader is likely to conclude that Breton is hopelessly fragmented into dialects (for example, no less than six ways to ask "from where?" are given on page 56). Thirdly, there are no exercises in any conventional sense of the term. The passages labelled "Exercices" in this course are merely lists of Breton sentences with their French translations. Fourthly, pronunciation is indicated by a folk phonetic notation invented by the author rather than in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). And lastly, there is no index, no glossary, and no Table of Contents, making it impossible for the student to look anything up or relocate the discussion of a given topic.

There is no shortage of Breton grammars in French. Two in particular that are useful are Desbordes (1983) and Favereau (1997). The latter, as a purely descriptive grammar, often gives more information that the beginning or intermediate student can handle and should therefore be attempted only by linguistically sophisticated or fairly advanced learners who are interested in dialect variation.

Finally there is one regular publication of note for those interested in Breton language and culture. The U.S. Branch of the International Committee for the Defense of the Breton Language (ICDBL) publishes a quarterly newsletter entitled *Bro Nevez* ("new country" in Breton) which offers articles on the struggles for official recognition of Breton in France, updates on the Diwan Breton-medium school system, book notices on publications in and about Breton language and culture, reviews of CDs, travel narratives, etc. The organisation also maintains a good website (see below).⁹ Although the newsletter itself will not directly help you learn the language, it is a wonderful way to find out about recent publications in and about Breton and its culture and history, and helps create an awareness that there are other people in North

⁹ The editor and contact person is Lois Kuter (kuter@netreach.net) or phone (215)886-6361.

America interested in Breton as well. There is a recently relaunched Canadian Branch of the ICDBL as well.¹⁰

The Internet

There are an increasing number of websites dealing with the Breton language and a variety of political issues of interest to Bretons and their sympathizers. Three of these are of particular interest for learners of the language.

A great starting point for exploring Breton resources on the Internet is the website of the International Committee for the Defense of the Breton Language (ICDBL) (<http://www.breizh.net/ICDBL/>). Their links page is the most comprehensive collection of links dealing with Breton language, history and culture that I have found. The ICDBL website also includes a page entitled "How to learn the Breton language if you don't know any French."¹¹ Membership in the ICDBL also entitles you to an annual list of members and subscribers, mailed out once annually with the newsletter. With this resource, some people should be able to find others interested in Breton living in their area.

A second essential Internet resource for the learner is Brezhoneg-L, a brand new online discussion group (created in November 2002) which already has a membership of 60 people as of this writing. The group describes itself as "a discussion group for people interested in or wishing to learn Breton [Brezhoneg] through the medium of English." One can join the list by visiting the website at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Brezhoneg-L>.

The third essential site for learners is the website Kervarker (www.kervarker.com) which is maintained by the organization Sav-Heol ("sunrise") and offers Breton language lessons in English which are based on the French text *Ni a gomz brezhoneg* by Marc Kerrain (discussed in section 5.1). An advantage over the book is that the exercises can be completed and

¹⁰ The contact person for the Canadian branch is Jeffrey D. O'Neill (jdkoneill@sympatico.ca), 1111 Broadview Ave. #205, Toronto, Ontario M4K 2S4 CANADA. Telephone (416) 422-0748.

¹¹ The links page can be found at <http://www.breizh.net/ICDBL/saozg/links.htm> and the page on learning Breton is available at <http://www.breizh.net/ICDBL/saozg/learn.htm>.

checked online; when the learner submits his or her answers, the wrong answers disappear, prompting him or her to try again. The site also offers "easy short stories" in Breton, an online French-Breton, Breton-French dictionary, and discussion forums in English, Breton, French, Spanish and German.

Finally, I list a small number of other sites that will interest many learners of Breton:

- <http://humwww.ucsc.edu/~gweltaz/brezhoneg/index.htm> offers some readings in Breton.
- <http://www.breizh.net/saozg/mahtmls.htm> provides 100 Breton terms for talking about the Internet. English and French equivalents are given.
- Another list of websites (<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/fanch.broudic/pajennou/liens.htm>) is provided on Fanch Broudic's website. Most of these are in French or Breton.
- The website <http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/saoghal/mionchanain/brezhoneg> is an English language site with a small number of Breton lessons.
- The newsgroup soc.culture.breton has an FAQ which is of some interest, available at <http://www.bretagnenet.com/scb/breton.html>.
- A good French-language website about the Breton language and culture is <http://www.gwalarn.org/>. This includes much information about books for learning Breton, simple readings for beginners, grammars, etc. (See in particular the page "Les supports pour apprendre le breton" at <http://www.gwalarn.org/bbb/lbsuppor.html#tricoire>).
- For locating Bretons in your area, the site <http://www.bretons.org/> includes links to pages with names and addresses of Bretons living throughout the United States, and separate pages for the Breton communities of New York and California.
- The website for An Tour Tan (www.antourtan.org), which calls itself the server for the Breton diaspora, offers a discussion forum for learners. Postings are generally in

French or in Breton. The site also allows one to listen to archived radio shows in Breton.

Conclusion

Unless one happens to live in or near Ottawa, Ontario, or in California, studying Breton in North America is largely a matter of independent study. Thankfully, there are some valuable resources available to the motivated student, including the organization ICDBL and websites like Brezhoneg-L and Kervarker. It is important for the learner to tap into such resources, which foster a sense that one is part of a larger community of people interested in Breton language and culture. Those interested in Breton can generally find camaraderie and support as well among North Americans studying one of the other Celtic languages.

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